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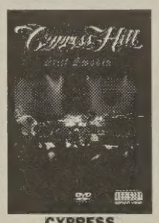

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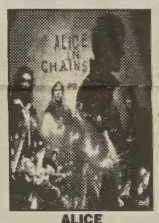

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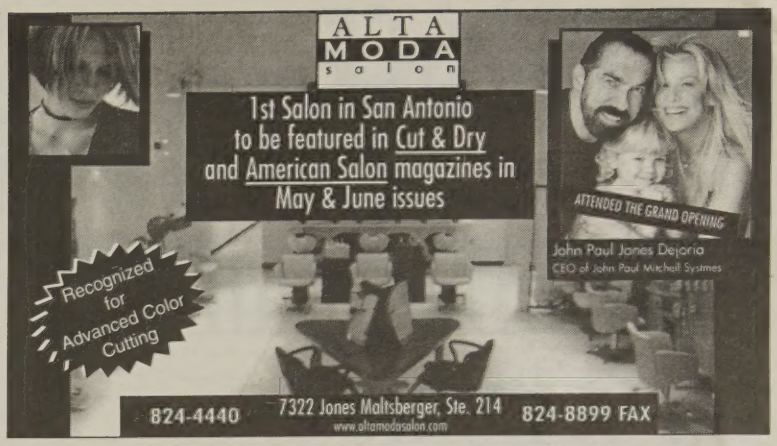
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The Texas Observer

Speaking it all back home

BY RD PERIN

Contemporary poetry often lacks a sense of adventure. Not that the subjects of poems are boring, or that spoken-word poets do not perform passionately; the problem is that poetic style has become stale. Many poets do not dare themselves to produce works that break conventions. And numerous performance poets focus their attention on winning poetry slams — an artistically limiting art form. Presenting words in an original way, and exploring of the tone and sound of words, are dead — *almost.*

Almost, because writer Sharon Bridgforth's new project, *amniotic/flow*, co-written with her daughter Sonja Perryman, is daring. Bridgforth calls *amniotic/flow* "a word *orchestrations/for two* voices"; she and Perryman are also the players in the production. Instead of presenting *amniotic/flow* as a poem simply read to an audience, the writers draw heavily from drama and music. Like the modernist schools of pre-World War II Europe, the author-performers have created a work that combines several modes of performance.

Figuratively speaking, *amniotic/flow* is a family photo album, capturing the history between mother and daughter in a series of vignettes. It begins with Bridgforth offering direct challenges to the victimization of women as expressed in the targeted vulgarity of inner-city rap and hip-hop. The mother seeks to instill a sense of dignity within her daughter:

i will not be your nigger bitch whore slut chicken head
i will not be your kicking-post licking stick arm-piece
i will not be your meal ticket pack mule junkie dealer

Yet *amniotic/flow* is more than a mother trying to impress black female pride upon her daughter; it is a deeply personal exposure. "It's about breaking out," says Bridgforth, "busting things open and letting people step in." Bridgforth and Perryman do not shy away from traumatic incidents that have occurred in their relationship. Bridgforth talks about her past drug abuse and how it led to relinquishing Perryman, and letting Perryman's father raise their daughter. Bridgforth describes this as the day she died. Later comes the snapshot when Bridgforth asks her 7-year-old daughter, "You know I'm gay, right?" Perryman already knew of her mother's sexuality, and it didn't faze her.

The piece also recalls lighter moments, such as Bridgforth's discovery that the then-13-year-old Perryman "had the voice of an old-time chitlin blues set."

No stranger to soul-baring work, Bridgeforth concedes she found this collaborative effort with her daughter particularly penetrating. "All my work is personal," says Bridgforth, "but it's never been this personal. I had a very difficult time doing this publicly."

> *"All my work is personal but it's never been this personal. I had a very difficult time doing this publicly."*
>
> SHARON BRIDGFORTH

For Perryman, who has just completed her first year studying drama at New York University in Manhattan, this is a first venture into writing. "I have always written in an academic setting and therefore always viewed writing as a sort of chore or homework," explains Perryman. "But I now view writing as more of a release and another way to express my voice."

It wasn't until New York City- and Boston-based writer/director Daniel Alexander Jones came onto the scene that *amniotic/flow* began to flesh out into an introspective examination. Initially, Bridgforth was the sole writer and focused on the positive aspect of her relationship with Perryman. Jones challenged the mother and daughter to scrutinize the relationship by giving them written assignments to complete. His dare was a success, and much of the material in *amniotic/flow* was reaped from those assignments.

Jones also introduced the sound of breathing as a rhythmic device and added choreographed movement to *amniotic/flow.* The director's innovations amplify the style of the script, which often calls for the two voices to overlap, or for one character to retell a tale while the other sings. Switching from vignette to vignette, the show behaves like a time machine, placing the audience directly into each scene as if it were family members witnessing events.

"Initially," Bridgforth recounts, "the concept for *amniotic/flow* came out of my experience of watching Sonja move into her own life as an independent young adult and my struggle with letting her go." The result is a catharsis for Bridgforth — through words, she has come to terms with her daughter's maturation. Perryman recognizes the transition and adds, "[*amniotic/flow*] has helped me to see a different side of my mom that I didn't see in childhood."

Amniotic/flow is an unusual performance. Perryman is right when she says, "I have read a lot on mother/daughter relationships, but have never seen a performance on it, and never in the manner in which we present it." The reading is fresh, breaking through the cliché conventions of spoken-word. Bridgforth and Perryman deserve applause for presenting a new style. Poets take note. ■

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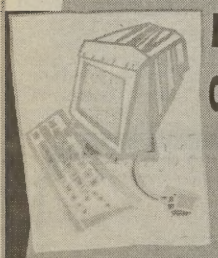

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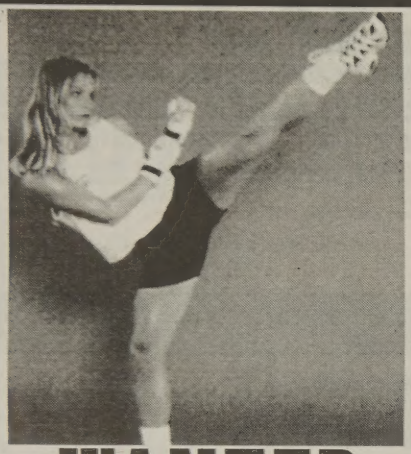

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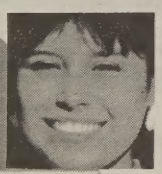

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LAST WORDS

To the dogs, in Sofia

WENDY BARKER

For most of my life, I have lived with dogs. Family albums are packed with snapshots of English cockers, a German shepherd, border collies, Irish setters, a Great Dane, and numerous mutts. On the walls of her home, my mother has framed as many photos of her dogs as of her grandchildren. But I was not prepared for the dogs of Sofia.

Neither was I prepared for the blurring of what had always seemed to me firm categories: Sidewalks are for walking, or at least, had been, in my clear-cut, American mental glossary. And a dog outside, unattached by leash or apparent owner, was lost.

So in Sofia, where I lived and taught during the fall of 2000, and where thousands of unowned dogs roam the sidewalks, I was confused. In the United States, if I saw a dog that appeared homeless, I would be gripped by concern: Someone needed to rescue that dog. Could I take it home? Should I take it to a vet? The shelter? If no one claimed the dog, it would be "put to sleep," or "put down." And of course, I always decided that I had more to care for in my life than I had already bargained for, and that I could not bring home a stray.

There are thousands of dogs wandering in Sofia, in no apparent relation to any human. Oh, there are plenty of well-groomed dogs on leashes, tugging at them in good European or American urban fashion, straining to sniff the next lamp post, or obediently trotting at heel. But as I walked the streets of the Bulgarian town, I brushed past almost as much canid fur as clothed human flesh. And I constantly navigated not only the uneven stones of Sofia's sidewalks but also the plentiful offerings of canine droppings in various stages of freshness. In the largest city of Bulgaria, I did not expect to vie for sidewalk space with a dozen dogs within one short block.

Once I watched a dog barking nonstop at a car whose driver was trying to park on the sidewalk where the dog was standing. For several minutes it was a stand-off. Finally the car drove away, at which point the dog sat down on its successfully defended turf. I think it was this incident that caused me to realize unowned dogs in Sofia are not necessarily lost. This brown and spotted dog had claimed this bit of sidewalk as his.

Gradually, as I established a daily walking itinerary, I began to notice and even anticipate the various and unique canine characters I would encounter. I looked forward to seeing the short-eared light brown bitch with teats dragging to the sidewalk as she poked her head into a basement restaurant window. On that sill, in almost fairy-tale fashion, would set cooling fresh loaves of bread and piles of cleaned fish. I never saw her reach in and grab. But every day I slowed my pace to watch as a woman who worked there extend handfuls of cooked meat, all the while murmuring the kinds of endearments one utters to a favorite pet. I passed this spot on the corner of Vasil Aprilov and Oborishte at least twice a day, and that bitch was always right there, either gulping handouts or trotting nearby. I never saw her pups, though, and wondered what had happened to them.

But once, I met some friends who were stopped near my apartment, staring intently at a small cream-colored puppy. They were thinking about adopting it, and were watching it as intently as anyone would when choosing the best of a litter from a purebred dam. Ultimately, they decided not to take the puppy home, and I had no way of knowing if it belonged to the bitch I watched being fed on the corner.

In Doctor's Garden, a rottweiler puppy, about 6 months old, often played with an old tire. I passed through on my way to and from the university to see him nosing the tire, biting it, snapping at it, barking, leaping, and, most amazing of all, scooting it with his nose like a boy with a hoop. There was the white dog that I used to see running up Marin Drinov, the street where we lived, with a whole sausage in its mouth. Someone fed that dog daily. The sausage was longer than its tail, and I never saw where the dog took its meal to swallow in private.

Shortly after we settled in to our apartment at 28 Marin Drinov, I noticed the little black dog with a white patch on his chest that quickly moved aside when we left the building's front door. From the kitchen window, I watched him walk in front of our building and the Mini Mart next door. He was always there, lying on the sidewalk across the street, facing us, or in the street, greeting us when we returned home. Other people from our building spoke to the black dog, and the woman downstairs not only greeted him, but always handed him something — a hunk of bread, or meat, which he took in his teeth and carried across the street to devour. I began to understand: This was our building's dog. He had found his pack. We were it. The dog went with the territory; he had chosen 28 Marin Drinov.

Who knows how it had started? Maybe a kind apartment dweller had fed the black dog, and he settled in. When it turned cold and began to snow, he spent his time in a small gap in the street-level stones of our building. Then I found him curled up on the second-floor doormat outside the apartment of the woman who had fed him. She must have let him in. I began to let him in too. The first time I did, I followed him upstairs, and watched from the landing as he curled up outside her door.

By strict definition, this dog was no longer a stray. He had an address — our building. In the last month we lived there, I began to feed the black dog too, not always saving the leftover rice for our next day's dinner, but leaving it out for our communal dog. He wasn't very tame, didn't wag his tail or stick around for patting, but he knew where to get what he needed. Months after returning to the States, I wanted to email a neighbor and ask if the little black dog is still there, but I think I know the answer.

I am not so naive to suggest that the thousands of unowned dogs in Sofia don't present an unsolvable problem. But there is a connection between the time I began feeding the little black dog and when I found myself, spontaneously, in our Mini Mart next door, shaking my head sideways to mean yes. In a country where nodding the head up and down means no, and sidewalks are for parking, to be lost — as the old Protestant hymn goes — can sometimes mean to be found. ■

Wendy Barker taught at St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia as a Fulbright Senior Lecturer during the fall semester, 2000. Her most recent collection of poetry is Way of Whiteness (Wings Press), which won the Violet Crown Book Award, and her translations (with Saranindranath Tagore) of the poems of Rabindranath Tagore are due out this fall from George Braziller, Inc. She is professor of English at UTSA.

SLOW WAVE
by Mark J. Tilford and Jesse Reklaw
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HIS EXPRESSION WAS HILARIOUS!
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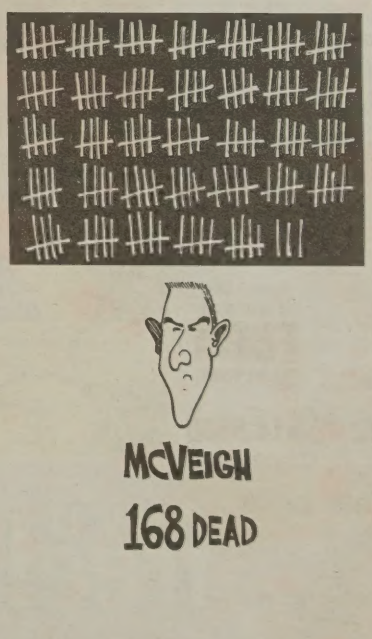

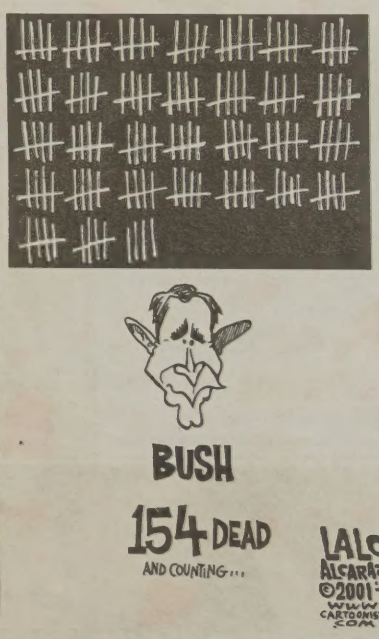

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